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Recensions

Book Reviews

Industrial Relations: A Current Review,

edited by Richard HALL, London: Sage Publications, 2006, 144 pp., ISBN-13: 978-1-412929-50-9.

This book mostly focuses on contemporary Australian employment relations and the Howard Government's current direction. Seven of its nine chapters cover topics such as: the *Workchoices* agenda; emerging labour market trends, wage outcomes, and tribunal decisions; the federal legislative program aside from the Workplace Relations Amendment Act (2005); and, relevant union and employer matters. The last couple of chapters address recent employment-related issues in the United Kingdom and two Asian transition economies. The book is structured as an edited series of essays contributed by different authors.

The publication's theme is that *Workchoices* is a retrograde step; being, at least, an unfair assault on the bargaining capacity and other entitlements of employees but also unlikely to be able to deliver its advertised benefits. The authors attack underpinnings of the new system as being based on: untested theory; an excessively individualist vision of the employment relationship; and, an abrupt and irresponsible departure from an approach that has evolved incrementally. Australia's Prime Minister is depicted as the architect of *Workchoices* and, as such, an ideologue indifferent to the plight of the low paid and low skilled and with scant regard for evidence-based public policy development. The authors enumerate the potentially undesirable effects of employees bargaining

individually with their employers; and the jettisoning of compulsory arbitration and industrial award protections. Such adverse outcomes include increased income disparity; an expanded low wage sector; discriminatory pay and working conditions for those with labour market disadvantage including women and young people; and, ironically, a possible diminution in productivity. It is argued that *Workchoices* increases complexity and ambiguity over who is covered by federal provisions and the division of roles between state and federal governments.

Another part of the book is devoted to the Howard administration's anti-union agenda. Here the narrative details how the new system constrains the capacity of organized labour to undertake its traditional roles. Aspects of such curtailment include legislative impediments to union/member communication, recruitment of new members, and protest activity.

In the final two chapters, the book addresses labour market trends in the United Kingdom and the emerging industrialized economies of China and Vietnam. In these sections two arguments are advanced; focusing on each region. The first is that the Blair government's agenda has been piecemeal and contradictory. For example, the administration has created a Low Pay Commission and new minimum wage provisions however resisted employee-friendly European

Union directives including the charter of fundamental rights. The author argues that China and Vietnam have gradually engaged in financial and economic deregulation within a political environment where the State (communist parties) retains control over aspects of social exchange. In these circumstances, workers in Asian transition countries continue to operate with limitations on freedom of association. However, single government-sanctioned unions which have operated solely as agencies for transmitting information down a hierarchy are slowly being restructured to embrace representative and advocacy functions.

Hall's book gives the arguments against *Workchoices* that have previously been presented fragmentally in employment relations journals and serious sections of the media. It fulfils this role competently; thereby providing a comprehensive and readable reference on how the new blueprint may change Australian working life. At 130 pages, the publication is easy and quick to read. In this sense it is suited to those seeking an introduction to the subject matter. On the downside, I was unclear of the book's focus. For example, I was not sure why the United Kingdom was discussed in the penultimate chapter or why two Asian transition economies were singled out for attention. Are these analyses intended to inform understanding of the current Australian situation? If so, no rationale is provided. One result of the book's chapter-structure is that, despite each section being internally coherent and a good essay on its subject; overall the work is difficult to characterize and amorphous.

I have mixed views on the book's style, which reads somewhat like a left-wing newspaper editorial. The authors' logic is straightforward; painting a gloomy picture of the Howard government's employment relations agenda's likely consequences. This approach makes the read interesting; possibly, partly, because it appeals to our perverse

sense of wanting to hear bad news. However the book could have paid more heed to presenting the government's case for change. For example, it dwells little on the possibility that there is a connection between aspects of labour market deregulation and job creation. Also, it does not genuinely explore the myriad ways that individual bargaining may play out in a complex setting but tends to dismiss the practice as being synonymous with worker exploitation. On each of these points the authors discard government assertions as untested theory and/or not supported by data – something, I would suggest, that may also be said about some of the book's various doomsday scenarios.

My final thought about this work is that it mostly recycles partisan arguments with which the interested reader will probably be familiar. I do not make this point as a criticism. There is a role for a research monograph that draws together the anti-*Workchoices* agenda. However I suggest one caveat: in discourse that has a left/right political character, if scholars must chose between taking sides and providing dispassionate explanation, the latter should prevail. Insofar as this tradeoff is concerned, sometimes I did not think the book's authors struck the right balance. As a consequence, I perceived missed opportunities to raise interesting issues. I will give one example. What is the significance of the Australian government making legislation about employment relations through using the corporation's power of the national constitution rather than its conciliation and arbitration provisions? In the longer term, could this merely give rise to a trivial institutional change with no important consequence for wage or work-related outcomes? Could a future government intent on reestablishing an effective safety net use the corporation's power to pass law setting minimum terms and conditions of employment rather than return to outsourcing this function to a

quasi-judicial arbitration and industrial award structure? If such an arrangement were to survive the inevitable high court challenges, would it be a bad thing? The authors could have provided more

detached speculation about these, and other, issues.

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Innovations sociales dans le travail et l'emploi : recherches empiriques et perspectives théoriques,

sous la direction de Paul-André LAPOINTE et Guy BELLEMARE, Québec : Presses de l'Université Laval, 2006, 330 p., ISBN-10 : 2-763783-14-7.

Le présent ouvrage collectif s'inscrit dans la continuité des travaux de recherches du CRISES (Centre de recherche sur les innovations sociales). Les deux directeurs le présentent d'ailleurs comme la suite de deux ouvrages importants publiés dans les années 1990 sur le même sujet par l'équipe du CRISES : *La modernisation sociale des entreprises*, publié en 1994, sous la direction de Paul R. Bélanger, Michel Grant et Benoît Lévesque, aux Presses de l'Université de Montréal et *Nouvelles formes d'organisation du travail*, publié en 1997, sous la direction de Michel Grant, Paul R. Bélanger et Benoît Lévesque, aux éditions de l'Harmattan. Les directeurs soulignent à la fois ce qu'ont en commun ces livres et ce qui distingue ce présent ouvrage des deux premiers. Comme les deux livres précédents, ce dernier s'intéresse aux innovations sociales mises de l'avant dans les entreprises et dans les organisations pour sortir de la crise du taylorisme et du fordisme qui marque nos sociétés depuis une trentaine d'années. Il propose aussi, comme les deux autres, des réflexions théoriques comme des recherches empiriques permettant d'avancer notre compréhension de cette crise, et de cette sortie de crise. Le présent ouvrage continue dans cet esprit mais, comme le soulignent les deux directeurs, les textes « se déplacent vers les facteurs de diffusion d'innovations sociales » (p. 4) plutôt que de se concentrer principalement sur leurs conditions d'émergence. Ils montrent aussi la fragilité des

innovations sociales et la difficulté de les maintenir en place. Finalement, ils mettent l'accent sur des types d'organisation et de travail plus variés que les premiers ouvrages qui se concentraient surtout sur les entreprises et le travail industriels. On explore ici davantage le domaine des services (les centres de la petite enfance), les travailleurs du savoir dans une bureaucratie (le Centre de recherches pour le développement international) et l'emploi atypique (les journalistes pigistes). Les directeurs ont donc raison de parler d'une continuité mais aussi d'une extension du domaine couvert par le CRISES.

Dans la première partie, nous trouvons un ensemble de textes très cohérents sur les nouveaux modèles de travail. Le premier texte, de Paul-André Lapointe, Guy Cucumel, Paul R. Bélanger et Benoît Lévesque, propose un bilan des innovations sociales dans les usines qui est, en quelque sorte, la suite attendue aux deux ouvrages précédents publiés par Bélanger, Grant et Lévesque. En fait, à partir d'une vaste enquête réalisée en milieu de travail sur les innovations sociales auprès de 628 dirigeants d'usine (364 syndiquées et 264 non syndiquées) et 260 représentants syndicaux, les auteurs tracent un portrait « de la diffusion des innovations sociales et des modèles de travail dans le secteur manufacturier au Québec » (p. 4). Ils constatent une très forte pénétration des innovations sociales, qu'ils regroupent autour des